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AUTHOR Jackson, Cydney H.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Intervention studies suggest that providing appropriate role models produces positive differences in ethnic minority members' levels of career maturity. The availability of appropriate role models is particularly important for African American women because of their double minority status; neither career interventions developed just for women nor career interventions developed just for African Americans address the issues that these women face (S. L. Bowman, 1993). The availability of appropriate role models for African American women was studied on two university campuses, and the impact of this availability on the self-concept of African American women was studied. Participants were 159 African American women from the University of Kansas and Ball State University. They provided demographic information, completed a measure of their within- culture identity, and described their role models. Seventy-six percent indicated that they did have an achievement role model. The role model was a relative 56% of the time, a teacher or professor 18% of the time, and a person in the media 15% of the time. Data show that African American women prefer African American women role models, but that they are not finding them on college campuses. The identification with a relative or teacher from outside the college community may provide a buffer for the negative impact of being a token in the university environment. (Contains 2 tables and 12 references.) (SLD)

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African-American Women's Mentoring Experiences

Cydney H. Jackson and Mary E. Kite

Ball State University

Nyla R. Branscombe

University of Kansas

Presented at the 1996 meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.

Correspondence should be sent to Mary E. Kite, Department of Psychological Science, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana 47306, e-mail 00mekite@bsuvc.bsu.edu.

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Abstract

Intervention studies suggest that providing appropriate role models produces positive differences in ethnic minority member's levels of career maturity (Dunn & Veltman, 1989). The availability of appropriate role models is particularly important for African-American women; because of their double minority status, neither career interventions developed just for women nor career interventions developed just for African-Americans address the issues that these women face (Bowman, 1993). We explore the availability of appropriate role models for African-American women on two university campuses and explore the impact of this availability on the self-concept of African-American women.

African-American Women's Mentoring Experiences

The importance of accessible role models to African American's success has been widely noted. Garibaldi (1991), for example, points to the availability of roles models as one of six factors accounting for the success of historically black colleges. Tangible evidence for his claim comes from the fact that black colleges account for about one fifth of the total African American enrollment in higher education, but produce two-fifths of all African American Bachelor's degrees and one third of all Master's degrees. Intervention studies suggest that providing appropriate role models produces positive differences in ethnic minority's levels of career maturity (Dunn & Veltman, 1989).

Research suggests that, when available, African American adolescents overwhelmingly prefer role models of their own ethnicity (Thomas & Shields, 1987). Unfortunately, ethnic minority role models are a scarce resource in higher education and the few who are there are often overburdened (cf. Moses, 1989). Yet the scarcity of appropriate role models may influence the college experience for African-Americans compared with White-Americans; African-Americans, for example, are almost twice as likely to drop out of college as White-Americans (e.g., Steele, 1992). These statistics are particularly troubling because African-Americans on the whole, report valuing education more than Whites (Cook & Curtin, 1987; Sigelman & Welch, 1991).

The availability of appropriate role models is particularly important for African American women, who are typically categorized as women or as ethnic minorities, but rarely as a member of both groups (Bowman, 1993). As a result of their double minority status, neither career interventions developed for women nor career interventions developed for African Americans address the complexities these women face. For example, African Americans tend to be more

group centered, placing more value on cooperation and interpersonal matters than do Caucasians who tend to have a more individualistic, competitive focus (Sue & Sue, 1990). Yet African American women may be more likely than their male counterparts to adopt a family-oriented perspective, leading them to focus on traditional gender roles and careers (Coates, 1987).

The presence of accessible role models undoubtedly influences African-American's self-concept. Some argue that disidentification with school leaves many African-Americans vulnerable to dropping out (Steele, 1992). For other individuals, disidentification with their ethnic minority group may occur, and this can create a different type of psychological vulnerability including reduced self-esteem and alienation (see Branscombe & Harvey, 1995; Phinney, 1990; Porter & Washington, 1979). In this article, we explore the link between the availability of an appropriate role model and the self-concept of African American women.

Method

Participants. One hundred fifty-nine African-American females from the University of Kansas and Ball State University participated in the experiment to fulfill an introductory course requirement. The majority of respondents grew up in primarily African American neighborhoods (M = 60.92%, SD = 38.97) and had primarily African American friends (M = 73.32%, SD=27.52). Slightly fewer than half went to a majority African American high school (M = 48.37%, SD = 33.91)

Procedure. Participants provided demographic information and then completed a measure of their within culture identity (e.g., primarily identified as African American, female, or American). Those who indicated they had an achievement role model reported the race and gender of that person and their satisfaction with that individual. Participants from the Ball State sample also described who that person was; these women also completed a measure assessing the

perceived climate of the university. All participants reported their degree of perceived control, satisfaction, depression, and loneliness.

Results

Seventy-six percent of the sample indicated that they did have an achievement role model whom they looked up to. Data from the Ball State sample indicated that 56% of the time, this role model was a relative; other categories consistently checked were teacher/professor (18%) or person in the media (15%). It is noteworthy that the majority of the role models were not members of the university community (98%). The role models were primarily African American women (74%), followed by African American men (15.3%), white women (5.6%), and white men (5.6%). Regardless of role model sex or race, satisfaction with the role model was high (M = 5.17 on a 6-point scale). However, race of role model was marginally related to within culture identity χ^2 (2) = 4.99, p <.08; preference for an ethnic minority role model was greater in those who placed greater importance on either their gender or racial identities (92%) or both (90%) versus their American identity (64%). Moreover, gender of role model was related to within culture identity, χ^2 (2) = 8.22, p <.02; those who placed greater importance on both race and gender (85.5%) were more likely to prefer a female role model compared to those who placed greater importance on either race or gender (58.3%) or their American identity (54.5%).

Personal well-being also varied by within culture identity (see Table 1); those identified as American reported greater control but more depression than the other two groups. Satisfaction was highest for those who reported both gender and race as important.

Despite the relative unavailability of an achievement role model on the university campus, participants were not dissatisfied with the climate of the university (see Table 2). Significant t tests comparing mean ratings on the chilly climate items to the midpoint of the scale indicated

more positive than neutral scores on that measure.

Discussion

Our data show that African American women overwhelmingly prefer African American women role models, but that they are not finding these women on university campuses. Moreover, this preference is greater for those who identify as either African American or women rather than Americans. Although the unavailability of a role model does not appear to affect perceptions of the campus climate, perhaps the identification with a relative or teacher from outside the university provides a buffer from the negative impact of being a token in a university environment (cf. Moses, 1989). However, achievement data for ethnic minorities suggest that the success of these women is not guaranteed (e.g., Steele, 1992) and additional data suggest that more readily available role models is important to ensure this success (e.g., Bowman, 1993). Our findings that cultural identity is related to well-being support this claim. Unfortunately, relatively few studies have examined the impact of role model availability on African American women's achievement; future research should more closely examine these issues.

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Table 1

Personal Well-Being by Within Culture Measure.

	Both gender and race	Either gender or race	American	E	p
Control	4.75	4.79	5.62	4.31	.03
Satisfaction	4.12	4.79	4.69	4.14	.07
Depression	2.79	3.50	1.85	9.30	.007
Loneliness	2.81	2.86	2.08	ns.	
	n=106	n=14	n=13		

Note. Higher numbers indicate more positive well-being.

Table 2

Mean Scores on Chilly Climate Items Compared to Midpoint of Scale

Item	Mean	SD	t
1. Professors at Ball State are approachable when I wish to discuss career plans.*	3.25	1.27	-3.34*
2. Professors at Ball State do not take students of my ethnicity seriously.	4.06	1.74	<1
3. Professors at Ball State make eye contact with me during lecture.*	3.06	1.95	-2.73
4. Professors at Ball State imply I need extra assistance even when I am confident of my abilities.	2.66	1.75	-4.33*
5. There are professors at Ball State who serve as role models or mentors to me.*	4.72	2.11	1.93
6. I am given ample opportunity to participate in classroom discussions.*	2.44	1.81	-4.87*
7. Professors at Ball State treat me with respect.*	2.44	1.08	-8.17*
8. I have been treated unfairly by professors at Ball State because of my ethnicity.	2.94	1.87	-3.21*
9. I have often had professors in whose classes I felt too uncomfortable to ask questions.	3.41	1.95	-1.71
10. I have professors at Ball State who recognize and greet me outside of class.*	3.22	1.96	-2.25
11. I feel comfortable at Ball State even though most of my fellow students are white.*	2.75	1.52	-4.65*
12. The white students in my classes make me feel unwelcome.	2.44	1.54	-5.73
13. My professors ask me to speak for all members of my ethnic group.	3.41	2.17	-1.54
14. I benefit by being a minority group member here at Ball State.*	4.03	2.01	<1

Note. Higher numbers indicate more positive attitudes. Items marked with * are recoded; to interpret mean, item should be worded in the negative.